



VIETNAM - 4 Catholic students in prison "subversives": they were promoting religious freedom and protection of life

Hanoi (Agenzia Fides) - Sentenced to prison for "propaganda against the State": is the fate of 4 Catholic students, tried by a court in Hanoi today for a crime that the Criminal Code punishes with prison sentences between 3 and 20 years. Duong Van Dau, Tran Huu Duc, Chu Manh Son and Hoang Phong, all between 23 and 25, come from the small Catholic community in the province of Nghe An and were arrested last year on charges of being "subversive", for distributing leaflets against the communist regime. These leaflets, reports a source of Fides, promoted freedom of religion and expression, the fight against abortion, blood donation, aid to orphans and victims of natural disasters.

After a half-day hearing, the court imposed sentences of three years and six months to Duong Van Dau, three years and three months to Tran Huu Duc, and three years to Chu Manh Son and also the decision of house-arrest for the next 18 months for all three. The fourth defendant, Hoang Phong, was threatened with a prison sentence of 18 months and then suspended.

A wide array of armed police guarded the entrance to the court today, where hundreds of supporters massed, mostly Catholics, who showed solidarity toward the four accused. Local associations and international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch have condemned the trial of the activists sent to jail "just for expressing their ideas." According to the Annual Report 2012 of Amnesty International, released today, in Vietnam, severe restrictions on freedom of expression and association continue. The individuals most at risk, Amnesty complains, are the pro-democracy activists and those who promote reforms on labor rights, or demand the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. To accuse them, and to discourage peaceful dissent, the authorities use, in particular, Article 79 of the Criminal Code ("subversion of the state") and Article 88 ("propaganda against the state"). In 2011, nine trials were held for about 20 dissidents, and 18 men were arrested, including 13 Catholic activists. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 24/5/2012)